

Mama Forgot Dinner

by Annabeth Balance, née Annie Faust

It was 1943, late October, and the days were getting shorter, the nights longer, the weather cooler.

We were still living “up at the mine” (or “up on the hill”), in that largely desolate, barely fenced in space with the four green wood siding houses with the white trim, all property of the Illinois Zinc mining company.

I had just turned seven, Jerry was yet to turn six, and Mama was way pregnant with Helen (though of course back then nobody knew the gender of the babies til they showed themselves.)

I knew that “Mama was going to have a baby”, but that was about the extent of my understanding. I did not have a clue as to how difficult it was to move around at that stage of things, or any of the other aspects of late pregnancy.

Even through all of her drinking, Mama was always totally responsible regarding maintaining our home, and our mealtimes etc. For example, she always had her meals planned out for several days at a time, utilizing the fewer shopping trips as necessitated by the wartime limitations on gas, tires and many other items of daily usage.

But this one evening, as dinner time approached, Mama got more and more agitated. She did not have anything in mind to fix for dinner. She simply drew a blank when she tried to recall what she might have had in mind to do for that evening, to no avail. So she started looking through the pantry, her cook books, looking at the dwindling vegetable garden at the side of the house — nothing was making a picture for an acceptable dinner. She was nearly (or probably actually) in tears of frustration and anguish for her kids’ dinners.

And about that time, we heard a car driving up the hill, and come to our house and stop — and we were not expecting anyone to be coming to the house at all, much less at that time of night.

It was one of Mama’s friends! And she was as surprised as we were. She said “Betty? Did you forget? I was going to take you and the kids to dinner tonight!”

Now that was an enormous gift! Not only was most everybody on pretty tight money, it was also a major matter to drive from wherever someone lived — in Hanover or further away like Hurley or Silver City, etc — all the way to where we were up on that hill, just to pick us up and take us to have dinner someplace.

Mama was hugely relieved of course, and terribly flustered to have forgotten such a major offering of kindness to her. We all scurried around and got ready to go out, and off we went.

I have no idea where we went or what we ate, but I’m sure that we had a nice enough time. Mama was still full of self-recriminations, but we all ignored that.

Then we drove back home, up those dark, rocky dirt roads, to the fenced area, and around to the back door to the house. And as we were getting out of the car, Mama said “I thought I turned off all the lights before we left, but there seems to be one on in the living room”. And we

went inside, and the house was filled with friends of Mama's, waiting there to shower her with gifts and good wishes for her baby-to-come.

They had all driven from their various homes all the way to our house to give her that baby shower! Mama was totally overcome of course; and we kids had no idea what any of that was all about, and the whole event took quite a bit of time before things settled down to a simple happy party. But it did settle down, and Mama had the complete understanding that a lot of people cared about her and her well-being that night.

She had the baby — my sister Helen — just a few days later, on November first.

Annabeth: *The odd thing is, I just remembered this story, for the first time in a long time, early today Oct. 30, 2018. Somewhere near the exact anniversary of the event!*

Mike: *I agree: what great timing! Helen told me several times how your mother would tell her she was "dropped off by the witches on their way back from Halloween" ... but I like your story better.*

Annabeth: *There was one other little add-on that is somewhat related to that comment. I considered but rejected writing it with the initial story, so I'll do it now.*

I used to tease Helen about her birth-date, only I turned it around — saying stuff like she should have been born just a few hours earlier, so she really would fall on Halloween, with all sorts of truly childish comparisons with witches and scary things and generally uncomplimentary stuff. And what I totally didn't "get" (of course) was the fact that she was born on Nov. first — which is All Saints Day, and so she was placed in an enormously positive, supportive and admired company.

I say "of course" I didn't recognize the reality of the symbolism of her birthdate because we were not brought up within any church setting, so I simply did not have any knowledge of all that. But it was a continual nagging negative thing that I just repeated over and over, and I'm sure Helen got way tired of hearing it every year. Needless to say, I am deeply sorry to have been such a thick-headed (and un-feeling) big sister.

Jerry: *That [dinner story] was a really nice story. I don't remember that particular event but I do remember the times in general. I remember that when Mama was in the*



hospital having Helen I stayed for a few days with a nice older (older as I saw them) couple who lived in the upper (Northeastern) part of Hanover or maybe even into Fierro. They had an outhouse and no running water in the house — just an outside water well with a hand pump. I don't remember if you were there with me.

I remember playing in their roomy side yard on ground that sloped slightly toward Hanover. There were a few houses scattered around but none real close. I remember playing on that sloping ground under some pine trees that were very different from our pinon or juniper trees. They had very long needles that you could sweep up into a comfortable make-shift bed.

I wasn't at all aware of Mama's drinking back then.

I remember we went out to eat occasionally at the Triangle Cafe in Bayard, NM.

Annabeth: Yes, I stayed with that same couple, and I also haven't the slightest clue as to who they were. I also remember those hugely thick beds of long-leaf pine needles — they certainly did make an impression on us, didn't they?

I am fascinated with your specific geographical orientation! What you are saying sounds right to me, but there is no way in the world that I would or could have come up with those locations and directions. Good stuff!

The Triangle Cafe! Yes! And that could well have been the place that Mama's friend took us in the story above.

I was not so much "aware" of Mama's drinking at that time; I just say the things I do based on later observations and reverse extrapolations. Comments from Daddy or Eva (generally) regarding her drinking, and either saying or implying how it had been going on for some length of time, even when they were making those statements.

I'm not certain, but I think that the time we spent at that couple's home was when Mama had her hysterectomy — which came soon after Helen's birth, but I don't know if it was an immediate continuation of the hospital stay, or if there was a brief time home, and then back to the hospital. And so of course, if it was a separate event, where did we stay for the "other" one?

And yes, I too thought of them as being really old!

Now all of this reminds me of another story, which I might or might not have already written, in the batch I did last year or so. That is of the time Aunt Nina set the hill on fire.

I think that came right after this period that we are talking about here. Mama was still very much in the recuperation period from that surgery, and she had been allowed to come home from the hospital earlier than the docs wanted, but she wanted to be home. So she had to promise that she would stay in the bed, and not get up to do anything, certainly not do all her regular housework etc. This bed-time was to last a significant period of time — I'm guessing something like ten days, judging from the lengths of time that they were keeping women after giving normal birth, etc.

So this happened during that bed-time — possibly like the 3rd or 5th day. Mama was inside of course, and I'm guessing that I was also, because I had no inkling of anything out of the ordinary going on outside.

Anyway, Aunt Nina came rushing in, all upset and distressed and saying that there was a fire on the hill, and she couldn't put it out!

She had been burning her trash in the big (55-gallon) oil can that each house up there had for that purpose, and "somehow" sparks flew out of the fire and landed in the extremely dry grass nearby, and it went from there. She had gotten the water hose out to try to put it out, but it went way too fast for that.

Well, I have no idea just what the conversation was between the two sisters, but I'm certain it was as fiery as the hillside.

They called Daddy and Uncle Bob from the mine to come to help, and they called the fire department (from Santa Rita, I think). They proceeded to do as much as they could do themselves until the fire truck could get there with a water tank and hose to pump it. But what that "as much as they could" amounted to was to take blankets and soak them in water in the bathtub, then carry them (heavy and dripping) out of the house and up the hill to the edge of the burning area closer to any house, and either wring the water out, or just spread the blanket out there and go back to do another one.

Well, that exertion, even just the walking much less the hauling of water-soaked heavy blankets up the rocky hillside, was certainly not what her doctors had in mind for Mama in that time.

And it kept being way longer than anyone thought necessary for the fire truck to get there, so finally Daddy went back down the hill to look for it and see what had happened. Turned out that the truck could not make it up the hill (maybe there was residual mud from recent rains or some such). Anyhow, Daddy (and others?) had to spend time working to help the fire truck get up the hill to the place of the fire, so by the time they did finally get there, it was largely under control.

I don't know (or don't remember) how it all resolved — whether there was anything for the firemen to do at all, or whether there was clean-up work that they did, and made sure there were no hot spots or embers left, or what. All I do remember is that Mama was mad at Aunt Nina for years after that.

And evidently, she did heal from that surgery OK, because I don't know of any follow-on issues that she might have had in that connection. (There certainly were other physical issues over time, though, as most of us can attest to! "Almost smile".)

